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ALLIANCE FOR THE CHESAPEAKE BAY

Public needs wake-up call for Bay's grass beds

Editor's Note / By Karl Blankenship

More than 15 years ago, when I first began writing about the Chesapeake, I had a chance to visit a huge eelgrass bed in nearby Chincoteague Bay. It was like an underwater jungle—thick vegetation covered hundreds of acres.

The eelgrass reached the surface of the water, brushing the bottom of our boat. It was a sunny day, and plant respiration was going full speed: The water was even filled with little bubbles of oxygen being produced by the grasses.

Bill Dennison, a seagrass researcher with the University of Maryland's Center for Environmental Science, said I was looking at one of the most productive ecosystems on the planet. "Acre for acre," he said, "it's more productive than a cornfield in Iowa."

It's an image I've never forgotten.

Impressive as they may be, grass beds suffer something of a "charisma gap" according to those who study them. They are one of the most important coastal ecosystems, but they are out of sight and out of mind to many. Few people get to visit lush grass beds like those in Chincoteague Bay.

"You don't attract tourists to seagrass beds very often compared to offshore systems like coral reefs," Dennison says nowadays. "But the proximity of seagrasses to the coast literally puts them in harm's way."

Indeed, and other scientists say grasses are "coastal canaries" that provide an early warning about coastal health, just like the canaries that miners once took into the shafts.

He and other seagrass scientists, including several from around the Bay, contend in a soon-to-be-published paper in the journal, Bioscience, that grass beds get far less scientific and media attention than other coastal ecosystems, such as coral reefs, even though they have much greater ecological value.

In that context, the Bay is far ahead of most places. It is one of the few areas where water quality standards have been adopted that are specifically aimed at restoring underwater grasses.

Even schoolchildren are exposed to programs like "grasses in classes" where they get to raise, and then plant, SAV. "I've been amazed at how much people know," said Mike Naylor, a biologist with the Maryland Department of Natural Resources.

Still, in much of he Bay, memories of healthy grass beds are becoming an ever distant memory. Few still have recollections like those of Bernie Fowler—longtime advocate of cleaning up the Bay and the Patuxent River—of wading through grass beds to catch crabs as a child.

"Those people who remember how good it used to be are disappearing," Naylor says. "It is not going to be too long when there aren't any people left who remember how remarkable the Bay's bounty was when we had these vast, beds of grasses in the '50s and '60s.

"You can tell people about how great it used to be all you want, but if you didn't see it, you don't understand," Naylor said. "That's why we try real hard to take a lot of people out to the Susquehanna Flats because you just have to see that once and you realize, 'Man, if we could just get those all over the Bay, what a difference that would make.'"

But making that difference will take a lot of work. With new development pressing toward the shorelines and warming water temperatures posing new threats to eelgrass, returning lush beds to the Bay may take